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Have The Courage to Intervene for Suicide Prevention

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By: [Dr. Jonathan Woodson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs](#)



September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. The Military Health System has an important role to play in educating the military community and the civilian communities where we live on how to recognize the signs of suicide risk, where to access care and treatment, and how to intervene.

I don't need to recite the statistics for you. All of you follow the news, and know that action is required to address the incidence of suicide among our Service members and Veterans. Both the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs are united in our approach and our outreach. Earlier this summer Secretaries

Panetta and Shinseki joined our most senior military officers, our top enlisted leaders, and mental health experts for our annual DoD-VA Suicide Prevention Conference where the focus was on getting back to basics.

There are a few important points that have emerged from our research and our experts in the field. First and foremost, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to eliminate suicide. This is a complex issue with many contributing causes. Yet, there are actions that we can and are taking to ensure everyone is more aware of what can be done.

Leaders, family members, friends and coworkers...the entire military community...MUST be engaged in identifying and helping those at risk. Many suicidal acts are impulsive. When we can intervene to assist an individual in crisis, we can often prevent the suicide from occurring.

Step one is to get them help. We have made great strides in reducing the perceived stigma of seeking mental health care, but this is just the beginning. Getting help is a sign of strength, not weakness. It takes more than the medical community to deliver this message, but I am very encouraged by the active engagement in this message from our line leaders, and – more importantly – from our senior enlisted leaders who have such a tremendous influence over our young men and women.

We also better understand how to build up our abilities to manage difficult life challenges,

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and bounce back from adversity. Each of the Services has introduced resilience training to provide leaders, individuals and family members with the skills to prepare for and manage personal and organizational stressors.

I'm proud too of the role that TRICARE has played in expanding access to critically needed services. Our networks serve an important role in supplementing our direct care system. For our brothers and sisters in the National Guard and Reserves, who often live far from their units and military installations, this network is a lifeline. As a longtime member of the Army Reserve, I can personally attest to the importance of these services to men and women who live in every state in the nation.

The National Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-TALK), www.militaryonesource.com, and other resources are readily available. We need to regularly communicate their value and easy accessibility to our friends and families in need and maybe even more importantly, to those close to someone who may be in need.

Bottom line: The key is recognizing others at risk and in crisis and not being afraid to step in. Our job as military health care providers, paraprofessionals, and members of the DoD community at large is to have the courage to intervene.

So, we have messaged that there is no shame in seeking help, but how do you overcome the shame and anger you may be met with by taking someone by the hand and doing everything in your power to get them to help if they haven't asked for it? You run the risk of being wrong and then what? How can our medical community become a force multiplier in educating the larger community about where to find help for someone else and how do you coax a person on the edge to get help? These are the questions we must continue to address in order to save our comrades, our families, our neighbors, and fellow humans.

Suicide prevention will be a prolonged effort. Awareness and perseverance matter. We can do more, and we are doing more to strengthen our team. To be better prepared, check out our [suicide prevention awareness information](#) and resources at Health.mil. Become the light of hope for someone by helping others learn where to go for help so as a larger DoD family, we can take care of each other!

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